

A Long Fall for “Billy Black Cloud”

By AN William R. Smith,
VAQ-135

It started out nice—sunny skies; warm, summer breezes; and melodic riverbeds parting picture-perfect canyons. It was one of those days that find you lost inside a swirling thought, spinning amongst your ideas and tumbling effortlessly into your own abyss.

I was driving home, returning from a year lost in sunny Pensacola, aimlessly driving for sights and sacred fishing grounds. I basically was empty-handed, headed fleet-avail after a rough encounter in AW School. A good friend had flown out to join me for the adventure home; we packed up, hit the road, and watched blue skies disappear into the reflection of our rearview mirror. It had begun.

The trip was perfect: just enough roadkill elk; stray cows; drug-trafficking, car-searching law enforcement; car problems; and bizarre “Deliverance” types to make it one worth remembering. After nearly 60 hours on the road, I arrived home in Longview, Wash.

Friendly showers, warm food, and good nights’ rest patiently awaited me. Little did I know this rest and relaxation were gearing me up for what would be my worst crash-landing in quite some time. I have a fairly colorful track record as far as weird accidents and spooky bad luck goes. My dad even took to calling me “Billy Black Cloud” in an effort to connect the constant trouble that stalks me—how thoughtful.

As much as I wanted to stay comfortably sunken into the cushions of my couch, sunshine poured through the open windows, taunting another adventure. With nervous anticipation, I made a few phone calls to some of the regulars—

these guys inspire and partake (mostly inspire) in most everything that goes wrong. How I met them and why I continue to associate with them remains a daunting mystery.

In no time at all, it cleverly had been suggested that we go cliff jumping. I hung up the phone, grabbed a towel and some shorts, and naively headed toward the meeting spot. I had jumped off a few bridges before—one about 65



As I surfaced and tried to breathe, I couldn’t help but notice that, while no air came in, a massive amount of blood came out.

feet high, another a little smaller, so I was game for whatever cliff we were after. We met, packed our things, and headed for a small place along the Toutle River.

When I saw the place we were jumping, I was a little nervous—mostly because I envisioned myself taking a few steps toward the cliff and tripping right before I jumped, then falling uncontrollably toward the swirling waters below. I took a breath, closed my eyes, and pushed the thoughts of unavoidable incident somewhere to the back of my mind.

In front of me, a tree grew about 15 feet out from the ledge, with two branches overhanging the 60-foot cliff—one below and one just within arm's reach of someone jumping out. As my friends drew closer, I flashed them a “what are we waiting for grin,” took a few steps, and jumped out. I knew if I didn't go first, I'd be much more nervous being the last to go.

It seemed like forever as I reached out, let my hands slide through the leaves of the higher limb, and then felt myself spin sideways—oh, what a mistake! I flailed my left arm in a sloppy attempt to right myself, and, after what seemed like a few more minutes, I thought I had been successful. Then, however, I felt a raindrop, and I knew my cloud had been following me all along. In no time, my freshly righted position morphed into a wicked side flop. All I could think was, “I hope it's not too bad.”

As I surfaced and tried to breathe, I couldn't help but notice that, while no air came in, a massive amount of blood came out. I was hoping I had a bloody nose or had bitten my tongue. Finally, I got a few breaths of air in, but the amount of blood coming up was gagging me, and I puked three times. A friend met me at the bottom, and one jumped from the top. I soon noticed my chest was getting tight, and a wheezing gurgle was interrupting my breathing.

We decided the situation was serious enough to warrant a hospital visit. After resting on the rocks, I walked back into the river and swam across to the side where the car was. We then hiked up the hill to the car and sped to the hospital. Three days, a bit of blood, and lots of morphine later, I left the intensive-care unit the proud owner of injured lungs—one massively contused, the other less serious—and a slightly bruised heart.

I spent the remainder of my time home on convalescent leave, sunken deep into the cushions of my couch, mocked by the crooked sunshine seeping through my open window. Fortunately, we are not all cursed with a black cloud, and the occasional rain visits mostly just to wet the ground. Most mishaps are avoidable and can be dodged with careful planning and constructive insight. Fully healed, I've finally reached my permanent duty station—home at last, where the dark clouds soar, and rain is just around the corner. ■

“Testing the Water” Proves Fatal

By Ken Testorff,
Naval Safety Center

A “No Swimming” sign was posted, but that warning didn't stop a 21-year-old E-3 from joining seven other Sailors and two local nationals from enjoying the waterfall at a park. Everyone except the E-3 previously had been to the 45-foot fall, which runs down an almost vertical cliff into a pool estimated to be 40 feet deep.

The water flow at this site usually is just above a trickle. This day, though, the waterfall was running very rapidly, following three days of rain. Witnesses said the fall and pool were far more turbulent than they ever had observed in the past—an observation that a photo corroborated. At the time, the air temperature was 84

degrees Fahrenheit, and the water temperature was estimated at 70 to 75 degrees.

Most of the group never had read the “No Swimming” sign [*written in two languages, one of which is English*] and reported they had seen both Americans and locals swimming there in the past. Two, however, said they had seen the sign before but just disregarded it because they had seen so many other people swimming.

By the time the E-3 arrived at the fall, two other Sailors already had jumped from a 25-foot rock ledge into the pool and were sitting in the pool area, near the side. A fixed rope assisted people in climbing to the ledge on the side of the